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Why the europeanization of Bologna process is a curved road? trying a response through the viable systems approach in reference to Albania

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Abstract

This paper makes an attempt to contribute to the analysis of the globalization effects over higher education system (HES) by using the Viable Systems Approach (VSA) for the adoption of Bologna Process in Albania. Through the VSA framework we exploit a conceptual-analytical model of implementation of the BP by using the vital parameters of consonance and resonance, useful for understanding the compatibility degree between supranational standards and national ones.

Keywords: Bologna Process, Viable Systems Approach, Information Variety, Albanian Higher Education System, Autonomy.

1. Introduction

Globalization in Higher Education has generally referred to an increasing contact between students and scholars around the world. Yet, it may be referred as a trend that shapes higher education opposing to the influence of the nation state as the main determinant of the Higher Education System (HES). In this last perspective, globalization can be determined as a force which imposes its set of rules, values and norms to single nation states. As a consequence, the national law frameworks of institutions, the social interpretation schemes and the categorical values (strong beliefs) are affected. For instance, Bologna Process (BP) has done a step towards the “Europeanization” of the higher education system by creating a common area of higher education. The increasing number of states adopting Bologna’s principles has fostered the globalization effects over the HES of most of the European countries. Still, there are doubts on the overall effects of sudden standardization on some countries with a completely different social-educational system which can not fit into the standard principles, because of different values and patterns that act as dissonant factors.

The paper’s purpose is the analysis of the effects of Bologna’s principles in Albania. The work is based on the framework offered by the Viable Systems Approach (VSA), attempting to measure the harmony and the implementation of BP in Albania. The basic measurement indicators, consonance and resonance, are used to analyze relations and interactions between viable systems conceived as information varieties.

The main implication of this paper can be the increasing awareness of countries, institutions and individuals about convergences/divergences between viable systems such as Bologna Process and national higher education

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systems. Considering the *VSA* as a general interpretation scheme, other practical and future implications can be considered not only in reference to Albanian HES, but also to other European countries.

2. Globalization trends in education

The European higher education landscape is primarily organized at national and regional levels and is characterized by a high degree of heterogeneity, which is reflected in organization, governance and operating conditions (European Commission, 2003). Even though, at a first overview of the prior research on higher education it can be outlined an obvious trend of convergence on several implementation processes over the last decades (Dobbins & Knill, 2009). At the beginning of the 1950s communication between national university systems was poor and it has been considered as a primitive site of collective governance (Gornitzka, 2010). Until the 1980s, the vision of university governance referred to the mix of bureaucratic steering and self-governance specifically seen in professional bureaucracies (Paradeise, Reale, Bleiklie, & Ferlie, 2009; McDaniel, 1996). Only in the late 1980s, at some extent there were some signs of the creation of a “European space” requested by the need of harmonizing study structures, increasing university autonomy and administrative capacity and quality assurance (Van Vught, 2009).

In the late 1990s, European countries betted on the knowledge-based economy and society and they manifested their strategy to create a common space for higher education and to bring coherence among the different and sometimes compartmentalized cooperation activities that had existed so far (Pépin, 2011). During the last two decades European countries have witnessed important and exciting developments in achieving a common space of convergence in higher education. The influence of the BP and the competition objectives of the Lisbon Agenda have promoted the creation of a common area in national higher education systems across Europe (King, 2009; Healey, 2008; Enders, 2004; Huisman, 2009). Still, there is limited knowledge on the extent to which the BP actually is leading to a converging process of national higher education policies (Heinze & Knill, 2008; Kehm & Teichler, 2007; Tomusk, 2007). The massive expansion of transnational communication and inter-linkages has provided a potential platform for policy exchange, inspiration, and borrowing. (Tomusk, 2007; Dobbins & Knill, 2009). At a general stage, an important role in converging cross-borders strategies is played by supranational institutions (to mention a few EU, OECD, World Bank) which influence domestic policy implementation by creating standards and guide lines that shape international debates and policies (Puukka & Marmolejo, 2008; Post, Clipper, D., Manning, Riley, & Zaman, 2004).

3. A systems perspective on BP: the Viable Systems Approach (*VSA*)

The Viable Systems Approach (*VSA*) is an interdisciplinary approach between reductionism and holism (von Bertalanffy, 1956) aiming the interpretation of systems construction, behavior, dynamics and evolution, relationships and interactions (Golinelli et al., 2002). The system can be an individual, a group, an organization, or generally a certain phenomenon, simple or complex such as BP. Based on systems thinking, the *VSA* interprets systems of various levels (subsystems and suprasystems) in particular environments perceived by one or more observers. The fundamental unit of analysis is a system made up of many parts (Parsons, 1971).

The main focus of *VSA* is the study of systems, more precisely, viable systems¹. The notion of viable system was firstly introduced by Stafford Beer (1972). According to Beer (1972) a viable system is a system that survives, remains united and is complete; it is homeostatically balanced both internally and externally and furthermore has

¹For the necessity of the further analysis, we should put into evidence that a viable system can be described also as an *Information Variety* (v_{inf}). The information variety is a composition of three layers: the categorical values, the interpretation schemes and the information units (Barile, 2009, 2011).

mechanisms allowing it to grow and learn, develop and adapt, and thus become increasingly more effective in its environment. Simply put, a viable system is any system organized in such a way as to meet the demands of surviving in the changing environment. One of the prime features of viable systems is that they are adaptable, which is a necessary requisite to meet their finality: the survival.

A system's ability to survive is determined by its capability, over time, to develop consonant and resonant behavior with subsystems and suprasystems (Piciocchi et al., 2009). A viable system can dynamically adjust its structure and behavior to achieve consonance with its context, and thus preserve its stability.

The concept of viability is a particularity of viable systems. In this prospective we perceive BP (BP) as a viable system in the context of higher education, having the scope of survival, which is manifested by the capability of implementation and preservation of its identity. The identity of this process basis on two pillars: 1- the "declaration principles"; 2- the implementation of principles throughout the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Therefore the survival of BP depends on the viability of EHEA, and the viability of EHEA depends on the implementations of Bologna's principles. The declaration principles represent the value proposition and the implementation process the value in use or the value in context (Vargo et al, 2008). The value proposition refers to the principles (study cycles, system of credits, mobility, social dimension, lifelong learning, employability, etc.) offered by the BP system to the different nation states. The value in use is the contextualized value by the single nations. In other terms, the value in use refers to the value accepted and used by the members of the EHEA in their own context of higher education.

The above value cycle, also called value co-creation, occurs only when the system that proposes value and the other that accept and use it in a specific context are compatible². The Viable Systems Approach measures the affinity between two systems through the vital parameters of consonance and resonance.

Consonance refers to the compatibility degree between structures of two or more systems aiming a potential interaction/exchange (Vesci and Hysa, 2011). According to Golinelli (2010, pp. 184) "*consonance is the ability to relate to the outside world in order to bring about the exchange of resources*". At the other hand, resonance is the actualization of the consonance; it is a tuning and coinciding of aims, or the ability of the system to create synergy with other systems, maintaining a shared goal. Hence, the resonance is dynamic because it refers to the operative conditions once tested the relation (the consonance); it refers to the interaction or the exchange of resources (tangible or intangible). Consonance and resonance can be expressed with the following formulas (Barile 2009, 2011):

$$Cons = \lim_{u_1 \rightarrow u_2} \frac{v_{inf1} - v_{inf2}}{u_1 - u_2}, \text{ then: } Cons = \frac{\partial v_{inf}}{\partial u} \quad (1)$$

$$Res = \lim_{u_1 \rightarrow u_2} \frac{C_{ons1} - C_{ons2}}{u_1 - u_2}, \text{ then: } Res = \frac{\partial C_{ons}}{\partial u} \quad (2)$$

Where:

v_{inf1} – is the information variety at time t_1 , before impacting with another information variety v_{infK} for a specific interest;

v_{inf2} – is the information variety at time t_2 , after impacting with another information variety v_{infK} for a specific interest;

u_1 – is the information background at time t_1 ;

u_2 – is the information background at time t_2 ,

where: $u_1 + u = u_2$;

$Cons$ – is the consonance between the respective systems (the relation);

Res – is the resonance between viable systems (the interaction).

Figure 1. Measurement of compatibility between viable systems through consonance and resonance

Formula (1) expresses the consonance between two definite information varieties/viable systems. It means that we can judge the affinity between two information varieties scanning their composition. As mentioned before an information variety is composed by categorical values, interpretation schemes and information units. The

²“As the main objective of the BP since its inception in 1999, the EHEA was meant to ensure more comparable, compatible and coherent systems of higher education in Europe.” Retrieved from: www.ehea.info.

consonance is measured in terms of the convergence/divergence between values, schemes and information possessed by two or more viable systems. Formula (1) can be also interpreted with the following question: which is the impact of the information units on the information varieties? In details, schemes serves to interpret the incoming information from the outside environment and values are responsible for acceptance or refusal of the information filtered before. Furthermore values have a central role in shaping schemes, as schemes have a central role in manifestation of values.

Formula (2) represents the transition from potentiality to actuality. Thus, resonance measures changes in consonance when systems exchange resources (e.g. information units). In other terms it conveys the intensity with which the sensitive level of consonance fluctuate when perceiving new incoming information. Hence, resonance can be interpreted with the impact of the information units on the respective consonance.

4. Evaluating Consonance and Resonance between BP and Albanian HES conceived as information varieties

Analyzing the implementation of Bologna's principles in Albania, it can be simply deduced that we have two information varieties (viable systems) for which the consonance and resonance can be measured: the Albanian HES and the Bologna Process, before and after signing the Bologna Accords. The BP and Albanian HES systems are not reciprocally influenced. BP can be qualified as a relevant suprasystem and an active/influential information variety, whereas the Albanian HES can be interpreted as a subsystem and a passive/influenced information variety.

Since 2003, Albania has become part of the EHEA involving a certain level of consonance and resonance between the national higher education system and the Bologna's principle. From the moment Albania has joined the BP, a certain level of consonance can be noted: from one side, BP aims to implement the same principles throughout the EHEA, and on the other side, Albania aims to align its HES into a European educational framework. The initial consonance of the common aims gives way to the interaction, the resonance, which refers to the implementation efforts. Problems arise during the implementation process where the interpretation schemes/attitudes (the mentality orientation) and the categorical values/strong beliefs (the resistance to change) of the Albanian context, make the convergence difficult to achieve. It is not a simple problem related to only the higher education system; it is a complex problem that embraces the whole social structure, where the education system is only a component or a subsystem of it.

For instance one can analyze how the Albanian 'system' interprets the principle of autonomy in higher education. Referring to moral, political and bioethical philosophy, autonomy means self-guidance or self-law. According to the BP there has been a tendency across the EHEA countries to reduce the direct level of control from the state (Enders, 2004). Granting greater "autonomy" to universities has been seen as a necessary feature of developing a more flexible, dynamic and entrepreneurial higher education sector.

The latest reforms in the Albanian HES (Law 9741, 9832 of 2007 and Law 10307 of 2010), have introduced 'autonomy' as an essential principle in the management of higher education institutions (HEIs). Nevertheless, the reforms have not truly changed the State high level of control over the HES. For instance, public HEIs still do not have financial autonomy on their expenditures, personnel budget and other financial issues. The State retains deep roots on the HES overcoming the need for autonomy that public HEIs require nowadays. From a VSA perspective, this situation leads to the creation of a national system with a different information variety than the BP one. As expressed in Formula (1) it can be observed that the Albanian HES before 2007 is represented by v_{inf1} and u_1 . From that moment it has been an evolution of the Albanian HES resulting from the resonance with BP, which in this case is the v_{infK} resulting as a hidden variable.

We consider that the shift from v_{inf1} (Albanian HES at t_1 , before 2007) to v_{inf2} (Albanian HES at t_2 , after 2007) and from u_1 to u_2 , is caused by BP. In addition, we consider the legal framework of Albania before and after the implementation reform of 2007 as a meta-information unit (u_t) embracing information units of the whole period from t_1 to t_2 . The implementation of the BP in Albania has influenced its legal framework introducing a new HES structure for public and private institutions. This significant variation has altered notably the information units giving a high level of difference between u_1 and u_2 . Simplifying the model, we intend the information variety of the

Albanian HES as a composition of these components: a) the principle of autonomy as a pertinent information unit of the declaration principles; b) the centralization of power as an interpretation scheme of autonomy; c) the power as a relevant categorical value of the higher education system. Hence, because autonomy is a key principle of the BP, it can be considered as an information unit and consequently the centralization its interpretation scheme and the power a categorical value that makes resistance on changing the general schemes. The interpretation scheme is created by the way power is used: when power is used by one or few entities we have a centralized decision making and a rigid hierarchical structure, and when the power is spread in web logic we have a decentralized and autonomous decision making. Since the Albanian HES has not effectively changed its dependency from the State, we consider ∂v_{inf} to tend to 0 as there can be observed no change in the level of centralization and power of the HES. Thus, ∂v_{inf} would tend to 0 due to lower level of variance of $v_{inf(1-2)}$ and higher level of variance of $u_{(1-2)}$. Thereby the model shows a significant dissonance of the Albanian HES with the Bologna's principles considered as information varieties compared to each other (Table 1).

Table 1. A VSA comparative analysis between BP and Albanian HES

Information Varieties (Viable Systems)			
Components of Information Variety	<u>Bologna Process</u>	<u>Albanian HES</u>	
	<u>Information unit</u>	Autonomy (<i>medium/high</i>)	Autonomy (<i>low</i>)
	<u>Interpretation scheme</u>	Decentralization	Centralization
	<u>Categorical value</u>	Power (<i>perceived as a legitimated consensus</i>)	Power (<i>perceived as a delirium of omnipotence</i>)

5. Conclusions

This paper, analyses the implementation of the BP in Albania through the framework of the VSA by showing that the compatibility degree between two systems can be evaluate in terms of values, schemes and information. From this perspective we introduce the consonance and resonance between BP system and Albanian HES. An interesting finding of our work is the fact that the two systems seem to be more consonant after the implementation of the declaration principles (as a consequence of resonance), but in substance the consonance does not respect all the levels of an information variety. If it is possible to find a certain consonance (more contractual than consensual) at the level of information units (study cycles, system of credits, mobility, etc.), it is also possible to notice that dissonance emerges between interpretation schemes (responsible for the interpretation of information units, i.e. the autonomy) and categorical values (i.e. the power). The example of Albania is representative for other European countries part of the EHEA, where the nascent consonance/resonance can be higher or lower depending on the context, HES model, social structure and history (path dependency). This explains the curved road of Europeanization of the BP and the difficulties that its principles have in finding the consonance with existing national higher education systems.

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